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God is the Bigger Elvis

Wendy M. Wright
Creighton University, Omaha, wmwright@creighton.edu

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God is the Bigger Elvis

Abstract

This is a film review of *God is the Bigger Elvis* (2011), directed by Rebecca Cammisa.

The short 36 minute documentary *God Is the Bigger Elvis* is a study in contrasts. We are first introduced to the protagonist, Dolores Hart, through 1950s and 60s Hollywood archival footage that highlights her glamorous decade-long career as a starlet when she acted alongside the likes of Elvis Presley, Montgomery Cliff, Warren Beatty and Anthony Quinn. Clothed in chic sweater-sets or elegant gowns, she is posed coquettishly with her co-stars for publicity photos. We next encounter Dolores in her present identity as Mother Prioress of the cloistered Benedictine Abbey of Regina Laudis in Connecticut. She is an elderly nun whose compassionate and un-surgically augmented facial features are framed by the contours of a tight-fitting wimple and whose silhouette is obscured in the folds of a heavy black habit.

Award winning documentary filmmaker Rebecca Cammisa is clearly enamored by the story and person of Dolores Hart/Mother Dolores and her camera sympathetically captures the contrast of the two portions of her subject's life. The story is straight forward. In the midst of her glamorous career and while planning her wedding to a successful architect, the young actress took a brief retreat at Regina Laudis. As a result, in 1963 she abandoned both her fiancé and her career to enter the monastery. Archival photos show her dressed in a flowing white wedding garment worn on the day of her monastic profession. Contemporary footage zooms in on the Mother Prioress as she counsels younger religious women or recounts her experiences that reveal her as a very human and likable woman. Although the film focuses on Hart, short interviews with other members of the community give glimpses into the complex adult personalities that the uniform religious habits worn by the community tend to obscure. The viewer is also

treated to a true sense of the personal challenges that a strict cloistered life, directed toward surrender to God and fidelity to community, entails. In this, *God Is the Bigger Elvis* does provide an accurate portrait of a certain sort of religious life.

The shortcomings of the film are, however, real. Hart's own dramatic choice of an alternative lifestyle is never deeply explored either psychologically or spiritually. Nor is the cultural context in which her decision took place explained. It is likewise disconcerting that the particular life in the Regina Laudis Abbey is presented without much explanation or background. Instead the viewer is left mainly with the stark contrast of a life that, at least if one reads the tabloid papers and listens to the aspirations of the many young people drawn to American Idol or TV reality shows, is thrown over for an inexplicable other way of being.

About the protagonist, much is made of Hart's glamorous early life. But the pre-Vatican II Catholicism in which she moved, and to which she responded, is not considered. We do learn from Hart that, even as she was going to the set daily to pretend to romance her handsome leading men, she never missed attending 6 a.m. Mass. And she does tell the interviewer that she sought out spiritual advice about her fear that she was exposed to temptations due to her choice of career. But the extent to which the vocation of a nun was consistently held up to Catholic schoolgirls in that era as the higher calling is not alluded to. In fact, it was regularly assumed that if one did really love God, then one would renounce marriage and family and the "world." How much these common assumptions of the era were operative in Hart's life is unclear. They are never mentioned.

The elder nun's personal explanations for her radical choice are likewise vague. She shrugs it off as God's mystery. While there is certainly something to say for this perception – a lot of life is awfully mysterious – the film tends to leave one perplexed. There is some hint that Hart's early life was "unstable" but we do not find out what that means. This reviewer would have liked some nod to the powerful dynamics of an all-female community and its potential ability to provide nurture or perhaps some consideration of the psychic security of a highly structured environment. More spiritually pertinent might have been some exploration of the interior drama of being drawn to an intentionally formative environment in which the radical search for God is the focus of life. But this is not done.

Nor is there any mention of the movie in which the young Dolores had acted in not long before she entered the convent. Hart's filmography includes a 1961 role as Clare of Assisi, a fact that the filmmakers do not mention. How much she might have been carried away by the medieval Franciscan romance of Clare's flight from the world to a convent is not explored. Perhaps that role simply solidified spiritual leanings she already had or perhaps the film captured the central values of the Catholicism Hart so held so dear. She was in fact publicly lauded by Pope John XXIII for not merely "playing" the nun from Assisi, but for "being" Clare.

The element of romance in the film is best captured by the inclusion of interviews with Don Robinson, Dolores' spurned fiancé. This elderly gentleman, who never married,

announces to the interviewer that he never found another woman like Dolores. In fact, for decades he has visited her at the Abbey. A final scene shows the two of them after a meeting in the monastery sharing a chaste goodbye kiss. The Mother Prioress's eyes well up as Don leaves but there is little sense of disappointment or missed opportunities, but rather of a fulsome romanticism. The tears are tender and from a woman who knows she is adored from afar.

About the monastery, a voice-over informs the viewer that Regina Laudis monastery is the only one of its kind in the United States. This is, in fact, the case (it is a 1947 foundation from the French monastery of Notre Dame de Jouarre). But, unless a viewer is familiar with the scope and variety of contemporary Benedictine monasticism s/he might think that all nuns are like this Connecticut group. The singularity of the community among other Benedictine monasteries is not explained. For example, although they share with other Benedictines the recitation of the daily divine office, manual labor, and hospitality, this group follows the primitive observance of St. Benedict's Rule. Thus they chant the seven-times-daily Divine Office in Latin, a charism (spiritual focus) insisted upon by their French foundress when vernacular chant was being routinely introduced in other communities. Nor is the unusual fact that the Abbey sponsors a theater that produces plays alluded to in the film. Nor do all Benedictine nuns wear the full traditional habit or speak to their visitors through the lattice work of a grille as do the members of the Regina Laudis abbey.

God Is the Bigger Elvis (a phrase that Mother Dolores herself coins) does allow a glimpse into a specific world of which many viewers may be totally unaware. It does do a good job of presenting the nuns interviewed, Dolores included, as complex, interesting and often surprisingly self-revealing individuals. But if one knows anything about the ideal of cloistered religious life, the goal is not to become somehow generic (despite the rules and outward uniformity) but to become more deeply aware of being beloved and thus become what God intends one uniquely to be. At the same time, if one comes to the film without any familiarity with Catholicism past and present or any familiarity with the aims and goals of Benedictine monasticism or the language that surrounds religious life, one might simply go away with wonderment or perplexity at the contrast between Hart's life then and now.

But that might be an important message that viewers could take away from the film. Perhaps the explanation for the film's inclusion in the 2012 Academy Award nominations for best documentary is the fact that what we see in Dolores Hart's story is the anti-Hollywood narrative. This might be a bracing realization. The un-surgically enhanced, more than modestly clothed, simple-living, un-self-focused, celibate protagonist vividly contrasts with and might call into question the dominant culture's assumptions about fame, achievement, wealth, beauty, and self-expression that are reflected in the mirror of Hollywood. Or perhaps the story will remain simply an exotic peep show into a life that is inexplicable. This reviewer feels that a more thorough contextualization and probing of Hart's story might have driven the point home more sharply.